

The localism plans of Compassionate Conservatives, Red Tories and Blue Labour will struggle to succeed so long as Whitehall powers remain in the hands of Ministers

Blog Admin

With David Cameron's recent relaunch of the Big Society, it is timely to re-examine plans from across the political spectrum to reform the relationship between the state and individuals and communities. Ahead of an LSE conference 'The Big Society and the Good Society' next week, [Tony Travers](#) looks at the growing desire for political localism and finds that it will only thrive if Whitehall is willing to devolve more democratic and financial powers away from the centre.



The Big Society and related policy drivers such as 'localism' and 'community' have emerged as a response to a perception that public and private institutions have become too big and distant for individual citizens to interact with. It is also argued that many people feel the political class ignores them. Promoters of policies to address the problem of increased alienation within parts of society also point to undesirable indicators such as a decline in social capital, rising anti-social behaviour and community breakdown.

In 2006, the think tank Policy Exchange published [Compassionate Conservatism](#), by Jesse Norman and Janan Ganesh. This pamphlet argued that the state had become sufficiently big to stifle individual and local action and there should be a re-orientation away from central government towards local government and citizens. The size and role of the state, the banks, big corporations and even local councils has more recently been questioned by those who promote smaller, community-based, control of institutions.

The most visible manifestations of thought about the need to reform both government and the private sector currently come from so-called 'Red Tory' Phillip Blond and the think-tank Respublica, and also from 'Blue Labour' guru [Maurice Glasman](#) whose origins lie in London Citizens, the faith and community-based activist group. These thinkers are seen as bringing intellectual rigour to a sprawling debate about the nature of the State, the strength of civil society and the right of individuals to influence the institutions that impact upon them.

There is a surprising similarity between the imperatives that drive Red Tories and Blue Labour. A modern world dominated by global corporations, too-big-to-fail banks and super-sized government has left citizens and local entrepreneurs cut off from any possibility of access to power and decision-making. The new Red/Blue thinkers want to re-empower local communities. They also share a belief that morality and religion should have a greater role to play in the future of society.

But Compassionate Conservatives, Red Tories, Blue Labour and other radical localists face a desperate problem. Rather like the former Soviet bloc after 1991, England has become used to hyper-centralisation, to demand-led dependency on the State and to government-imposed service guarantees. Leading politicians in the major parties attack any idea of a public provision 'postcode lottery'. Most mainstream Labour politicians see the state as a wholly benign force. Few Conservatives honestly believe in dismantling large private corporations. Liberal Democrats still support traditional, elected, local government as the solution to the problem of centralisation.

Moreover, national politicians and civil servants appear to have little faith in local decision-making. The government has published only the most limited proposals to allow increased local powers over taxation. The Exchequer is responsible for 95 per cent of all UK taxation and is set to remain dominant. Such high levels of central tax-determination inevitably lead to centralised decision-making. All the think-tank localism in the world will come to nothing unless Britain can transfer a significant proportion of tax-raising power away from the Exchequer.

As things stand, the government's proposals for the Big Society and localism seem likely to shift some powers from councils to neighbourhoods and communities. But there are few proposals to give local neighbourhoods significant democratic powers over the NHS, education, work & pensions or justice. Council services may be decentralised to wards and parishes, but Whitehall powers will remain in the hands of ministers.

